

HUNDREDS OF PHYSICISTS AND OTHER SCHOLARS DEMAND REINSTATEMENT OF PHYSICIST FIRED FOR WRITING BOOK

More than 750 scientists and other scholars in a wide range of fields have condemned the American Institute of Physics for firing *Physics Today* magazine staff editor Jeff Schmidt over his book, *Disciplined Minds* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers). Among the protesters signing letters delivered on 14 January 2002 are two Nobel Prize winning scientists and more than 500 physicists — the largest number of physicists ever to speak out on a freedom-of-expression issue in the United States.

The protesters have written a flurry of letters demanding that the magazine reinstate Schmidt, who was fired after 19 years on the job a few days after officials at *Physics Today* and the American Institute of Physics, which publishes the magazine, saw his book. *Disciplined Minds* is about the politics of professional work, and uses the education and employment of physicists to illustrate its points. The origin of job dissatisfaction, argues Schmidt, is employers' insistence on exclusive control over the political aspects of the work, and the subordination of the vision of those who actually do it.

The details of the case are explained in an appeal to scientists by three professors of physics. (A copy is appended below.) The appeal resulted in a protest letter signed by more than 540 individuals, mainly physicists. About 100 individuals, mainly physicists and former *Physics Today* staff members, drafted other letters blasting the magazine for its repressive behavior and likewise demanding Schmidt's reinstatement. Massachusetts Institute of Technology linguist and social critic Noam Chomsky helped to solicit signatures on another protest letter, which has been signed by about 150 scholars and others at institutions across the country, in a wide variety of fields outside of the sciences.

Ironically, the American Institute of Physics is governed by the American Physical Society and other physics organizations that often speak out publicly when dissident physicists outside the United States are punished for expressing their views.

All of the group and individual letters, along with the names and affiliations of the more than 750 signers, are posted on the Web at <http://disciplined-minds.com>.

The protests forced the American Institute of Physics to break its silence and issue a very revealing public statement, which is posted on the Web at <http://disciplined-minds.com> — along with a response by physicists Talat Rahman of Kansas State University, George F. Reiter of the University of Houston, Michael A. Lee of Kent State University, and Denis G. Rancourt of the University of Ottawa.

The protesters include scientists from 34 countries: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bahrain, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, United States, Yugoslavia — and, in a turn of the table on free-expression, Cuba.

CONTACT...

Talat Rahman, 785-532-1611, rahman@phys.ksu.edu

George F. Reiter, 713-743-3527, george@meitner.phys.uh.edu

Michael A. Lee, 330-672-2577, mlee1@kent.edu

Denis G. Rancourt, 613-562-5800 x6774, dgr@physics.uottawa.ca

Jeff Schmidt, 202-537-3645, jeffschmidt@alumni.uci.edu

Journalists may request the telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of any of the 750 protesters; ask any of the above contacts or send an e-mail message to SpeechRights@aol.com.

THE APPEAL...

Dear fellow scientist,

As you may have heard, *Physics Today* magazine recently gave a very punishing review to a book written by physicist Jeff Schmidt: The magazine fired him.

Jeff was a staff editor at *Physics Today* for 19 years — until his supervisors saw *Disciplined Minds*, a thought-provoking critique of workplace hierarchy and the politically subordinate role of salaried professionals. The book uses physicists and physics graduate school to help illustrate points about professionals and professional training in general.

Within days of learning about his irreverent book, the higher-ups at *Physics Today* dismissed Jeff summarily, apparently using the book as an opportunity to retaliate against him for his workplace activism and to ignore his widely praised work for the magazine. Details of Jeff's firing are given in the statement below, and can also be found on the Web at <http://disciplined-minds.com>

Please join us in protesting Jeff's dismissal, by adding your name to the letter below. We will send the letter to Marc H. Brodsky, Executive Director and CEO of the American Institute of Physics, which publishes *Physics Today*, and we will also post it on the Web.

To add your name to the letter, please send an e-mail message to SpeechRights@aol.com. Include your name and an affiliation, such as your department and institution. Please ask others to add their names, too.

You can also write directly to Marc Brodsky, at brodsky@aip.org. If you do, please send a copy of your letter to SpeechRights@aol.com so that it can be posted on the Web. We may send you updates on this issue (if you prefer not to receive them, just let us know).

Your support will make a big difference.

Sincerely,

Talat Rahman
Fellow of the American Physical Society
University Distinguished Professor
Department of Physics
Kansas State University

George F. Reiter
Professor of Physics
University of Houston

Michael A. Lee
Professor of Physics
Kent State University

BACKGROUND INFO ABOUT JEFF SCHMIDT AND *DISCIPLINED MINDS*

By Chris Mohr and Marlowe Hood
Former *Physics Today* staff members

In *Disciplined Minds*, Jeff Schmidt challenges professionals to view their role in society in a new and unsettling way. He argues that professional work has both technical and political components, and that salaried professionals are expected to be technically creative but politically subordinate. Such subordination does not occur without a fight, the book maintains, and so the workplace becomes a battleground for the very identity of the individual, as does graduate school, where professionals are trained.

Jeff has a PhD in physics from the University of California, Irvine, and he draws many of his examples from the predicament of employed physicists and physics graduate students. (In one chapter, he examines the physics PhD qualifying examination and shows how the ostensibly value-neutral test can identify candidates who will likely have a compliant attitude toward their employers.) His book details the battle one must fight to be an independent thinker and to advance one's own social vision in today's corporate society. It offers practical advice on how to make employment more than an exercise in knowing your place, and how to make graduate school more than an abusive "intellectual bootcamp" that breaks the individual in to playing a conventional role. You can avoid the cynicism and intellectual timidity that afflicts so many professional employees, he says, but doing so is not easy, and he discusses how it can be done.

While at *Physics Today*, Jeff played the most prominent role in staff efforts to improve working conditions, increase staff participation in decision-making, and broaden the range of viewpoints allowed in the magazine. He also led an effort to force *Physics Today* to live up to its advertised claim of being an affirmative-action employer, noting that the magazine was hiring and training only whites as editors, a pattern that eventually left the magazine with an all-white staff of 16 professionals and a non-white secretarial staff of 3.

In firing Jeff, the managers at *Physics Today* cited a statement, at the beginning of *Disciplined Minds*, that he had spent "some office time" writing the book. That constitutes "misconduct," they said. Jeff's colleagues, however, saw this charge more as a pretext to get rid of someone who was persistently pressing for changes in workplace policies. Indeed, the fact that the magazine's managers dismissed Jeff after so many years of service not only without a hearing, but also without asking him a single question about his work on the book, suggests that they were looking for an opportunity to remove him.

By the time *Disciplined Minds* was published, *Physics Today*'s managers had already tried unsuccessfully to silence Jeff with measures just short of dismissal. At one point, for example, they put gag orders on Jeff and another outspoken staff editor, warning that they would be fired if they said anything "counterproductive." These orders were eventually lifted due to pressure from coworkers. *Physics Today* even banned private conversations in the workplace, announcing that all conversations between staff members must be open to monitoring by managers. Jeff was not alone among his colleagues in finding these measures repressive.

The managers at *Physics Today* apparently thought the book would be perceived as so provocative that no one would object if they fired Jeff. They were wrong. Those lodging protests to date include sixteen former *Physics Today* staff members (including us), the National Writers Union, and 160 scholars, writers and educators in a wide range of fields. Even the State of Maryland, after an unemployment benefits hearing, rejected AIP's charge that Jeff's work on the book at the office constituted misconduct, finding that *Physics Today* fired Jeff without evidence that his spare-time

writing interfered with his work for the magazine. (During the years that Jeff was writing *Disciplined Minds*, *Physics Today* gave him two promotions and 19 salary increases based explicitly on the quantity and quality of his work for the magazine.) Details of the state investigation are posted on the Web at <http://disciplined-minds.com>, along with the protest letters, reports in the press and reviews of the book.

Physics Today has hired what union activists and labor lawyers describe as the most notorious union-busting law firm in the country (Jackson, Lewis, Schnitzler & Krupman) to deal with any legal challenges in this case. That's revealing, but it doesn't mean that the law is a likely source of justice for Jeff. The law generally favors employers, and so Jeff's best chance for justice is support from the physics community.

(The above is based on information from Jeff and other former *Physics Today* employees, and on relevant documents.)

THE LETTER...

To: Marc H. Brodsky
Executive Director and CEO
American Institute of Physics
One Physics Ellipse
College Park, Maryland 20740

Dear Dr. Brodsky:

As physicists and other scientists concerned about freedom of expression in the science community, we were troubled to learn of your dismissal of Jeff Schmidt, who had been an articles editor at *Physics Today* magazine for over 19 years.

As we understand it, you fired Jeff after you saw his book, *Disciplined Minds*, and in particular after you learned that Jeff had used some of his spare time at the office for critical writing about education and employment in physics and other fields.

While we do not necessarily agree with Jeff's views about the situation of physicists and other salaried professionals, and do not expect you to, we believe that free debate within the physics community is healthy. We expect you to encourage it, not stifle it, especially because physicists are known for speaking out when physicists internationally are punished for expressing their views. Your actions as head of the American Institute of Physics help to shape society's view of the physics community. We urge you to reconsider your decision, and offer to reinstate Jeff as an editor at *Physics Today*.

We ask that you publish this letter in *Physics Today*, to bring our concerns to the attention of the wider physics community.

Sincerely,

(Signed by 541 individuals,
mainly physicists. For their
names and affiliations, see
<http://disciplined-minds.com>.)